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ABSTRACT

A study reviewed 88 doctoral dissertations written during a 4-year period in the 1980s on the use of feedback for performance improvement. The purpose was to sugget applications of the findings to teaching improvement in postsecondary education, and to determine the extent to which faculty development centers contribute to this research. Dissertations were analyzed in terms of the following questions: (1) in what occupational settings was the research conducted? (2) who received the feedback? (3) who provided the feedback? (4) how was feedback conveyed? (5) how many people received the feedback message? (6) for what purpose was feedback given? (7) what research methods were used? (8) what are the potential uses for these research findings? (9) at what institutions were the dissertations done? and (10) in what fields of study were the dissertations done?. Data on each of these questions is provided in tabular form. The resulting dissertation profile suggests that considerable attention was directed to the topic of feedback to improve performance, and that studies that gathered data in educational settings are scattered across many universities and many disciplines, with very few based in higher, adult, or continuing education. There was no evidence that faculty development centers stimulated or sponsored this research. Bibliographic citations for the 88 dissertations are included. (DB)

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A PROFILE OF RECENT RESEARCH ON FEEDBACK

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(Revised May 1990)

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Chart 1

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

We studied uses of feedback for performance improvement by analyzing doctoral dissertation abstracts from January, 1985 through December, 1988.

Research goals:

1. To profile dissertation studies of feedback for improving performance by answering the following questions:

   In what occupational settings was the research conducted?
   Who received the feedback?
   Who provided the feedback?
   How was feedback conveyed?
   How many people received the feedback message?
   For what purpose was feedback given?
   What research methods were used?

2. To suggest applications of these findings to teaching improvement in postsecondary education.

3. To determine the extent to which faculty development centers contribute to this research.

Chart 2

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to profile recent dissertations on feedback, we relied on the dissertation abstracts optical disc. That disc holds records of the 144,836 dissertations listed in Dissertation Abstracts International from January, 1985, through December, 1988. With a few keystrokes we learned that the word "feedback" appeared in the title or abstract of 2,175 of those dissertations.

To determine which disciplines and fields merit close attention, we drew a ten percent sample of the abstracts. After examining items in that sample, we were able to eliminate several of the ten categories used by Dissertation Abstracts International to classify dissertations, categories with little relevance to skilled human behaviors such as teaching. Thus, we narrowed our focus to five categories: communication and the arts, education, social sciences, physical sciences (only the sub-topics of computer science and operations research), and psychology (all sub-topics except biological and physiological psychology).

Of the items in these five categories that mentioned feedback, we eliminated any in which feedback was not a major variable or topic of the study, or in which feedback was not directed toward improving performance, or in which feedback was studied in non-human systems, or if no abstract was included on the disc. Two researchers independently coded the remaining 88 items, using the categories shown in Appendix A. There were few disagreements between raters, and they were resolved through discussion. Charts on the following pages report how dissertations were distributed across codes selected from Appendix A.

Appendix B contains full citations to these 88 dissertations.

Chart 3

IN WHAT OCCUPATIONAL SETTINGS WAS THIS RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

Occupational Setting	n	%
Elementary and Secondary Education	24	27.3
Higher Education	23	26.1
Service Industries (sales, banking, and so on)	14	15.9
Manufacturing (heavy and light Industry)	12	13.6
Therapy (psychological, rehabilitative)	7	8.0
Medicine/Health	7	8.0
Sports/Athletics	5	5.7
Government/Military	2	2.3
Vocational Education	1	1.1
Applicable to all settings	6	6.8
	101	

Because of duplicate coding, abstracts total more than 88 and percentages total more than 100.

About half of the studies took place in formal educational settings (and about half of those in postsecondary education). About one third took place in business and industry.

Chart 4

WHO WERE THE RECIPIENTS OF FEEDBACK?

Category	n	%
Professional	29	33.0
Student	25	28.4
Non-Management	10	11.4
Management	9	10.2
Academic/Tenured	7	8.0
Limited Term/Non-Permanent	5	5.7
Teaching Assistant	2	2.3
Recipients not described in the abstract	10	11.4
	97	

Because of duplicate coding, abstracts total more than 88 and percentages total more than 100.

In about 60 percent of the studies, professional employees or students received feedback. Only two studies involved teaching assistants.

Chart 5

Chart 5

WHO PROVIDED THE FEEDBACK?

Category	n	%
Lower in status	16	18.2
Equal in status	13	14.8
Higher in status	19	21.6
Researcher/Investigator	32	36.4
Visual display	4	4.5
Source not described in the abstract	4	4.5
	88	

Compared with the status of the recipient, it was slightly more likely that feedback was provided by someone higher in status than by someone lower in status or by someone equal equal in status.

Chart 6

HOW WAS FEEDBACK CONVEYED?

Category	n	%
Written (note, questionnaire, printout)	22	25.0
Oral (supervisory)	17	19.3
Display (computer, chart, and so on.)	16	18.2
Oral (consultant)	13	14.8
Oral to a group	3	3.4
Not described in the abstract	31	35.2
	102	

Because of duplicate coding, abstracts total more than 88 and percentages total more than 100.

One third of the abstracts did not address this point. Of the remaining 57 dissertations, feedback was given in writing in 39 percent and orally in 58 percent.

Chart 7

HOW MANY PEOPLE RECEIVED THE FEEDBACK MESSAGE?

Category	n	%
One Person	59	67.0
Small Group	12	13.6
Self Monitoring	2	2.3
Total Organization	1	1.1
Not specified in the abstract	19	21.6
	93	

Because of duplicate coding, abstracts total more than 88 and percentages total more than 100.

For 59 of the 69 abstracts that addressed this point, feedback was directed to one person.

Chart 8

WHY WAS FEEDBACK GIVEN?

Category	n	%
Develop or Maintain Skills	42	47.7
Refine Skills	36	40.9
Attitude, Motivation, Goal Setting	23	26.1
Personnel Evaluation (summative)	8	9.1
Application/Conditions Affecting Delivery	8	9.1
Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution	5	5.7
Knowledge Acquisition	3	3.4
Program Evaluation	3	3.4
Introduction of a Change	2	2.3
Basic Research in Feedback	2	2.3
Quality Control	1	1.1
Purpose not stated in the abstract	2	2.3
	135	

Because of duplicate coding, abstracts total more than 88 and percentages total more than 100.

Nearly all studies used feedback to affect work related skills or for motivational purposes. Few studied summative personnel review or program evaluation.

Chart 9

WHAT RESEARCH METHODS WERE USED?

Category	n	%
Quantitative Methods	58	65.9
Qualitative Methods	12	13.6
Both	1	1.1
Could not determine from abstract	17	19.3
	88	

For the 71 abstracts specifying methods, fewer than one in five used qualitative methods.

Chart 10

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL USES FOR THESE RESEARCH FINDINGS?

Category	n	%
Practice (supervision/coaching/consulting)	46	52.3
General Tips and Ideas	39	43.3
Further Research	28	31.8
Development of Models	5	5.7
Policy	3	3.4
Instrument Development	1	1.1
	122	

Because of duplicate coding, abstracts total more than 88 and percentages total more than 100.

Results of this research are most informative for those who work with individuals in supervisory or consultative relationships.

Chart 11

AT WHAT INSTITUTIONS WERE THE DISSERTATIONS DONE?

Institution	n
University of Southern California	5
Hoffstra University	4
Indiana University	3
Ohio State University	3
University of Nebraska	3
Florida State University	2
George Washington University	2
Portland State University	2
Virginia Polytechnic University	2
Western Michigan University	2
William and Mary University	2
University of Houston	2
University of Kansas	2
University of Maryland	2
University of South Florida	2
University of Virginia	2
Institutions producing a single dissertation	48
	88

Only two universities produced more than three of these dissertations. Forty-eight universities produced only one.

Chart 12

IN WHAT FIELDS OF STUDY WERE THE DISSERTATIONS DONE?

Psychology	
Industrial	17
Clinical	4
Social	3
Experimental	2
Developmental	1
Business Administration	
Management	10
Sociology	
Individual/Family Studies	1
Theory and Methods	1
Speech	
Communications	2
Education	
Teacher Training	17
Administration	12
Guidance and Counseling	4
Curriculum and Instruction	4
Higher Education	3
Physical Education	3
Psychology	3
Adult and Continuing	2
Technology	2
Community College	1
Reading	1
Special Education	1
Health	1
Tests and Measurements	1
Agriculture	1
Vocational	1
	98

When a dissertation was attributed to more than one field, duplicate entires were recorded.

About one-third of these dissertations come from management and industrial psychology and another third from teacher training and educational administration. Only five are classified as higher education or adult education or continuing education.

Chart 13

CONCLUSIONS

Our profile of dissertations during a four year period in the late 1980s suggests that considerable attention was directed to the topic of feedback to improve performance. Studies that gathered data in educational settings are scattered across many universities and many fields of study with very few based in higher, adult, and continuing education. We found no evidence that faculty development centers stimulated or sponsored this research.

Regarding future research, we believe that greater attention is warranted to studies of feedback that is directed to groups and that is conveyed via computer. Qualitative research approaches may well illuminate these issues more effectively than quantitative approaches alone.

Our work was limited because we consulted only abstracts, and it was further hampered by the quality of abstracts, many of which were poorly written and lacked essential information. Nevertheless, even if we had scrutinized complete dissertations, we doubt that integrative substantive conclusions would have emerged. These studies are too ideosyncratic in conceptual framework, instrumentation, and setting to yield significant generalizations.

While it is understandable that dissertation studies will be varied, it is also desirable that they contribute to a coherent body of knowledge and that the knowledge be presented in ways that also inform practice. We suggest that professional networks and associations to which dissertation advisors belong explore ways of coordinating dissertation research toward these ends.

FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

-A Coding Sheet-

A. Research Sources

1. Occupational Sector

ESS	Elementary/Secondary Education
VOC	Vocational Education (post secondary)
HED	Higher Education (post secondary)
SUP	Support/Specialized Therapeutic Services
MED	Medical
LEG	Legal
SER	Service Industry (sales, banking, transport, repair, hospitality,)
MFG	Industrial, Manufacturing
GOV	Government
ART	Visual/Performance Arts
SPT	Sports/Athletics
REL	Religious Affiliation
ALL	Applicable to all areas

2. Recipient of Feedback Data

RMG	Management or Supervisory
RNM	Non-Management Status
RPF	Professional Status
RNP	Non-Professional Status
REX	Experienced
RNE	Non-Experienced or On-The-Job-Training
RLC	Licensed
RNL	Non-Licensed Status
RTP	Academic Status (tenured or permananet)
RNT	Non-Tenured, Limited Term, Non-Permananet
RSS	Student Status
RTA	Teaching Assistant
RNC	Recipient not clear

3. Source of Feedback Data

SLS	Lower in Status
SHS	Higher in Status
SEQ	Equal in Status
SIV	Researcher/Investigator
SVD	Visual Display
SNC	Source not clear

4. Delivery Medium

DD	Display/Device (video, computer, disk)
VC	Verbal (1:1, Collaborative or collegial)
VS	Verbal (1:1, Supervisory)
VG	Verbal Group Feedback Session
WW	Written Warning
WR	Written (Checklists, Surveys, Letter, Review Notes, etc.)
NC	Delivery medium not clear

5. Number of Recipients

SLF	Self Feedback
ONE	Individual to Individual
GRP	Group
ORG	Organization
NNC	Number of recipients not clear

6. Feedback Purpose

AMI	Attitude/Motivation/Goal Directedness
MAB	Maintain Behavior/Check-up on Behavior, Develop Behavior
KAQ	Knowledge Acquisition
SKD	Skill Development
CHG	Introduction of a Change
PGE	Program Evaluation
PSE	Personnel Evaluation (Summative)
APL	Application Issues/Conditions Affecting Delivery
QLC	Quality Control
PRB	Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution
BRS	Basic Feedback Research
PNC	Purpose Not Clear

7. Type of Research

RQL	Qualitative Research (Case Study, Field Study, Descriptions, etc.)
RQT	Quantiative Research
RBT	Both Qualitative and Quantitative
RND	Research Not Detailed

8. Application/Uses for the Research

AT	Application Tips and Ideas
AC	Clinical Supervision/Coaching/Consulting
AP	Policy Considerations
AM	Feedback Model Available
AR	Implications/Research Possibilities

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